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SUBJECT: President Kabila Delivers Upbeat "State of the Nation"
Address

¶1. Summary: President Kabila's December 6 "state of the nation" address was generally upbeat and conciliatory. It contained few surprises. Kabila defended the offensive against renegade General Laurent Nkunda, hailed achievements in infrastructure and services, defended the agreement with China, and cautioned against moves to amend the Constitution. End summary.

¶2. President Joseph Kabila delivered a Constitutionally-mandated "state of the nation" address to the Senate and National Assembly on December 6, the first anniversary of his inauguration. It was the first time in the history of the country that a chief of state has addressed parliament. As expected, he strongly defended the offensive against renegade General Laurent Nkunda in the east, and affirmed he was determined to bring peace and security to that region. As summary of the speech's key points follows:

INTRODUCTION

¶3. Kabila began by thanking the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo for choosing him as the first President elected under universal suffrage. He said the speech was for him an opportunity to bear witness to the Congolese people's shared vision for a better future. He drew attention to the progress that the nation has made in the past year, including the "establishment of institutions worthy of a modern nation."

INSTITUTIONS

¶4. Kabila provided a brief summary of the nation's institutions and their proper roles, which, he said, all must respect. He briefly described each branch's functions, emphasizing that the legislature would not govern and the president would not legislate. He then, and later in the speech, devoted considerable time to the judiciary system. He called for "an independent, efficient, professional, and impartial judiciary," but cautioned that the nation could not be a "republic of judges" and that the judiciary must be accountable to the people. This line drew enthusiastic applause. Even greater applause greeted the statement that "only the facts and the law count, not race, ethnicity, or social condition" and "the rich and influential cannot expect special treatment."

SECURITY AND PACIFICATION

¶5. Not surprisingly, Kabila devoted considerable time to the security situation, and in particular the current FARDC offensive against pro-Nkunda forces in Masisi territory in North Kivu. In keeping with the overall upbeat tone of the speech, the President began by asserting that of the country's 145 territories, only Rutshuru and Masisi, both in North Kivu, are experiencing conflict, and that several areas plagued by violence a year ago, including

Katanga and Ituri, are now peaceful. He conceded that nothing can be accomplished without security and pacification, and, without referring to Nkunda by name, stated that "a stubborn dissident general" had brought war and desolation to the people of North Kivu, and that the nation "would not be held hostage to outlaws."

¶16. Kabila reiterated his determination to bring order and peace to the affected areas; expressed deep sympathy for the victims of murder, rape, and looting; and saluted the "anonymous heroes" of the armed forces and police. He emphasized his commitment to political and diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts, and announced an upcoming conference of leaders from North and South Kivu. He also pointed with obvious pride to his government's negotiations with Uganda concerning the Rukwanza island border on Lake Albert, and with Angola on the Kahemba border dispute.

INFRASTRUCTURE

¶17. In keeping with the speech's positive tone, President Kabila said progress had been made in improving the nation's infrastructure in 2007. He conceded, however, that much remains to be done. He cited generators being installed on the Zongo and Inga 2 dams, actions taken to better control petroleum distribution, maintenance projects for schools and hospitals, plans for new universities in Bukavu and Kivudu, and two new hospitals in Kinshasa. He specifically cited Congolese-born U.S. professional basketball player Mutombo Dikembe, who financed a hospital in Kinshasa, and exhorted the Congolese diaspora to do more to help their native land. He noted that the opening of these hospitals was the "first time in decades" such new facilities had been opened in the RDC.

ECONOMY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

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¶18. In these areas as well, Kabila pointed to progress and accomplishments. He noted that a first forum on unemployment had been held, and that overall salaries are rising due to a slowly improving economy. He cited progress in implementing codes and contracts in the mining sector and in reintegrating child soldiers into society.

CONTRACTS WITH CHINA

¶19. Kabila stated that the international donor community had not been able to keep up with the RDC's development needs and that his government was obligated to seek assistance elsewhere. His tone turned defensive in defending recently signed agreements with China, describing them as "completely transparent" and of mutual benefit to both countries. He explained, in great detail, his government's reasons and justifications for signing the agreements, which include contracts to fund railroads, highways, hospitals, and schools.

AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION

¶10. Apparently referring to efforts by some members of the ruling coalition in the National Assembly to amend the Constitution to make the President the chairman of the the nation council of magistrates, President Kabila stated that "not all problems can be resolved by amending the Constitution," and that the Constitution should be amended only in cases of "extreme necessity." These comments elicited vociferous applause from opposition deputies.

AN UPBEAT AND PROUD CONCLUSION

¶11. In his concluding remarks, Kabila stated emphatically that "some have said change (in the Congo) is not possible, but they do not know the soul of the Congolese." He went on to say that "many doubted our ability to hold elections, to restore peace, and to unite our nation, but we proved the skeptics and the defeatists wrong." Both remarks elicited enthusiastic applause. He noted that

Congo is "better than it was a year ago, and much better than 15 years ago, and we will continue to improve day by day."

COMMENT

¶12. Kabila's intention was clearly to counter a growing perception among many Congolese (perhaps not unusual in situations of rising expectations after a long war and democratic elections) that the country has made insufficient progress since his 2006 inauguration. His singling out of China as having come to the RDC's rescue was not well received by ambassadors from some Western donor countries that have given billions of dollars in aid to the RDC. Many expressed the view that Kabila came across as ungrateful and too biased in favor of a much newer partner. Another view is that Kabila was not trying to praise China as much as trying to defuse criticism, by raising it publicly, over the lack of transparency in the contracts with China. Kabila did briefly mention trips to South Africa, Belgium and the United States, but did not give details. Kabila's delivery of what came across as a well-crafted U.S.-style State of the Union address was excellent. The hour-long speech was generally upbeat and conciliatory and broached many of the most important issues facing the country. However, there were few surprises or revelations, and no indication of concrete plans to achieve the social and economic goals articulated during his campaign. End comment.

GARVELINK